

Mid-Session Education Report

State Superintendent Linda McCulloch

The most frequent question I am asked by Montanans these days is: “How is the Legislature doing on education?”

Now that we are past the halfway point, I am pleased to report real progress is being made. The Legislature has a good variety of bills that seriously begin to rebuild our school funding system and provide a quality education for every Montana child.

It began with Governor Schweitzer’s historic commitment to increase funding for schools by \$81 million. Senate Democrats were joined by twelve Republicans to pass Senate Bill 177 that allocates \$77 million of much needed dollars to schools.

Missoula Rep. Holly Raser introduced House Bill 125 to provide schools with a \$78 million increase that gives local school trustees the ability to spend the money to meet current needs in their local schools.

These two bills provide the Legislature with different transition options for school funding as we develop a new school funding system.

This 59th Legislature has been working hard to develop a definition for “*a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools.*” Senator Don Ryan’s quality education definition bill (SB152) has passed the Senate. The House Select Committee for Education Funding has a half dozen different “definition bills” and will draft a unified House bill when the Legislature returns.

A special bipartisan, joint Senate and House Committee is meeting to develop a new school funding formula. The goal of the Committee is to complete this task in the remaining 46 days of this legislative session. It is a daunting task, but the committee members are optimistic.

Under consideration in the House Education Committee a proposal, House Bill 47, by Great Falls Rep. Kathleen Galvin Halcro, provides state funding for full-time Kindergarten. Full-time kindergarten is a valuable way to improve a student’s learning and ultimate success in school.

For the first time since the 1972 Constitution, there are funds proposed to recognize the “*distinct and unique cultural heritage of the American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity.*” Substantial dollars to meet this Constitutional promise of Indian education for all Montana students were proposed by the Governor and increased by the Education Appropriations Subcommittee for a total of \$4.4 million to develop classroom resources and train teachers.

Providing a quality education for every child requires putting a quality teacher in every classroom. Montana faces a serious problem when it comes to recruiting and retaining high quality teachers. Billings Rep. Gary Branae's House Bill 111 addresses this issue by providing a \$1000 per educator entitlement to each school district.

Another approach is offered by Missoula Rep. Tom Facey's House Bill 124 to establish a statewide insurance pool for school employees. The proposal has the potential to dramatically cut insurance costs and free up millions of dollars for the classrooms. Both bills remain in their House committees.

I am hopeful that House Democrats and Republicans will not allow partisan politics to deadlock the House of Representatives on key education legislation. Montanans are looking to the Legislature for solutions. The education of Montana's school children is too important to be held hostage by either party.

Throughout this Legislative Session, the staff of the Office of Public Instruction and I are providing the Legislature with volumes of information and different options that will address the very real issues facing all Montana schools.

Your voice is important in the coming weeks of the Legislature's debate on education. Montanans from every part of our state need to contact their Legislators and let them know what they think about the different bills to overhaul our Montana's school system.

Throughout this process, we need to never lose sight of our ultimate goal to provide every child with a quality education. The changes the Legislature makes need to work for every child --regardless of where they live in Montana -- for now and in the future.

Our kids are counting on us.